They Wouldn't Take No for an Answer in the Battle Against AIDS

STEPHEN HOLDEN

FILM REVIEW

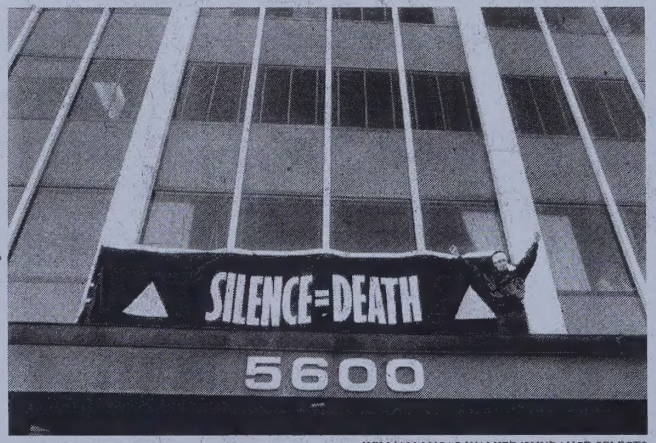
The currents of rage, fear, fiery determination and finally triumph that crackle through David France's inspiring documentary, "How to Survive a Plague," lend this history of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power a scorching electrical charge. This aggressive gay activist organization, better known as Act Up, formed in New York in 1987 and became the irresistible force that made seemingly immovable objects — government agencies and drug companies — give way, develop new treatments and speed them to the market as the AIDS epidemic spread unchecked among the gay population.

Act Up came together by a kind of spontaneous combustion after a speech by one of its founders, the playwright Larry Kramer. An early demonstration, staged on Wall Street, protested the high cost of AZT, the first drug approved for people with H.I.V. some six years after the news about a mysterious illness that was killing gay men. The drug cost roughly $10,000 a year per patient. Burroughs Wellcome, the company that manufactured it, was eventually forced to lower the cost in what was the first of many Act Up victories.

From the beginning the organization was extremely adept at using the news media, from its indelible logo — the words "Silence = Death" printed below a pink triangle on a black background — to its public demonstrations at the National Institutes of Health, the Food and Drug Administration and St. Patrick's Cathedral. One clip shows members dumping ashes and bone fragments of AIDS casualties through a fence onto the White House lawn.

The film is a briskly paced, straightforward chronology made up largely of footage shot mostly by the protesters (31 videographers are credited) and told in their voices. As the documentary gallops forward, it conveys the urgency of a desperate race against time. Many of the group's leaders were H.I.V.-positive men facing imminent death.

Their efforts were met with indifference and hostility from wary politicians. In New York City, Mayor Edward I. Koch called the demonstrators "fascists" after he was shouted down at a gay history exhibition, but he subsequently backtracked and used the words "concerned citizens." In response to denunciations by Jesse Helms, the longtime North Carolina senator, Act Up members stretched a giant condom over his home.



WILLIAM LUCAS WALKER/SUNDANCE SELECTS

Peter Staley, hanging an Act Up banner at the Food and Drug Administration headquarters in Rockville, Md., in 1988.

If the movie expresses equal measures of sadness and outrage, it is charged with the exhilarating excitement felt by soldiers on the front lines of battle. Its heroes may have been sick, but in their struggle they are fiercely alive. They include Mr. Kramer; Robert Rafsky; Ann Northrop; and, most visibly, Peter Staley, a formerly closeted Wall Street bond trader with H.I.V. who left his job and helped found the Treatment Action Group, an offshoot of Act Up. Self-taught in the science of AIDS, the group collaborated with pharmaceutical companies like Merck in the development of new drugs.

A breakthrough came in 1996 with the arrival of protease inhibitors, whose workings are clearly explained in a remarkable animated segment. They produced the so-called Lazarus effect, in which the symptoms in seriously weakened AIDS patients disappeared in 30 days. The death rate plummeted. Increasingly sophisticated pharmaceutical cocktails have since made AIDS a chronic, manageable disease for those who can afford the protocol. Today, according to the film, seven companies manufacture the drugs, which have saved six million lives.

The success of Act Up might serve as a template for other movements, like Occupy Wall Street, whose protesters also put their bodies on the line. But many of those protesters are not fighting the personal, immediate life-or-death battles faced by the members of Act Up, who quite literally saved their own lives.

In the words of Mr. Kramer: "The government didn't get us the drugs. No one else got us the drugs. We, Act Up, got those drugs out there. That is the proudest achievement that the gay population of this world can ever claim."

How to Survive a Plague

Opens on Friday in New York, Los Angeles, Chicago and San Francisco.

Directed by David France; written by Mr. France, T. Woody Richman and Tyler H. Walk; director of photography, Derek Wiesehahn; edited by Mr. Richman, Mr. Walk and Jonathan Oppenheim; music by Stuart Bogie and Luke O'Malley, with songs by Arthur Russell; produced by Howard Gertler and Mr. France; released by Sundance Selects. In Manhattan at the IFC Center, 323 Avenue of the Americas, at Third Street, Greenwich Village. Running time: 1 hour 50 minutes. This film is not rated.